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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: HIDDEN ARMENIANS AND THE ROLE OF THE
PATRIARCHATE

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Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

11. (C) Summary. Acting Armenian patriarch Archbishop Aram Atesyan estimates there are 110,000 ethnic Armenians in Turkey including Armenian Turks and illegal Armenian migrant workers. He would put the number of those of Armenian descent in Turkey much higher -- nearly 2 million -- given compulsory conversions to Islam, including by members of his immediate family still residing in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir. Over the course of two meetings with the Consul General, Archbishop Atesyan explained his professional challenges as well as the challenges confronting the Armenian community in Turkey. He indicated that his stressors include dealing with members of the Religious Council who wish to elect a new patriarch, acting as a de facto consul for Armenian migrants, and responding to issues such as December's Armenian apology campaign. End Summary.

Armenian Turks and Armenian Migrants

12. (SBU) The Archbishop reported that there are nearly 40,000 Armenian migrants living and working illegally in Turkey in addition to 70,000 Armenian Turks. (Comment: His numbers are significantly different than other estimates that put the total number of Armenian Turks at 40,000 and economic migrants at 70,000.. End Comment.) According to Atesyan, most migrants and nearly 50,000 Turkish Armenians live in the Istanbul province. The largest Turkish Armenian population (20,000) lives in the Sisli municipality of Istanbul, the Archbishop said, and Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul visits the Armenian Patriarchate, knows some Armenian words, and selected an Armenian deputy mayor. The second largest population of 15,000 Armenians lives in Istanbul's Bakirkoy municipality.

13. (C) Illegal Armenian migrants live largely in Western Istanbul in Kucukcekmece and Buyukcekmece and the Archbishop estimates that between 70 and 80 percent are unemployed. He did note with enthusiasm that greater numbers of migrants - who were not particularly religious in Russia-influenced Armenia - are now attending church in Turkey. While in Armenia, most migrants did not marry in the church and the Patriarchate initially refused to baptize children born to parents who did not have a church certificate of marriage. Archbishop Atesyan said he began baptizing children even without a church marriage after Mesrob II left his duties. In many ways he fills the role of an Armenian Consul General in Turkey in his support of the Armenian migrant population. The Archbishop said he has arranged for the repatriation of bodies back to Armenia because there is no official government representative. (Note: The only Armenian

diplomats resident in Turkey are the Armenian Permanent Mission to the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which is headquartered in Istanbul. Ambassador Mirzoyan and his staff have complained about the difficulties they face in explaining to their expatriate citizens the limits of their non-consular role in Istanbul (reftel). End Note.) If he were to open his doors to all migrants, he said would "get nothing else done," and therefore limits his interaction with individual members of the community.

Patriarchate's Relationship with the Diaspora

14. (C) While the Patriarchate does receive individual members of the Diaspora during private visits, Archbishop Atesyan said it is not in direct touch with Armenian Diaspora in the U.S. because "it would give us a headache." Responding to a question about Armenian interest in the warming relationship between the government of Armenia and government of Turkey, he contended that the Diaspora is most interested in the events of 1915. However, he said he believed the Armenians, especially those close to the Turkish border, would welcome the opening of the border and improved relations for commercial purposes (Note: The findings of an October 2008 INR Office of Research poll show that 89percent of Armenians surveyed had a negative view of Turkish citizens and the GOT. Fifty eight percent said they have a very negative opinion of Turkey. End note.)

Pressure to Elect a New Patriarch - and Potential Candidates

ISTANBUL 00000068 002 OF 003

15. (C) Archbishop Atesyan explained the process for electing a new patriarch upon the death of current Patriarch Mesrob II. According to Atesyan, Armenian bishops who are Turkish citizens or children of Turkish citizens are eligible. These bishops must be at least 35 years old, hold the position of bishop or higher, and have no problems with the local government or the church. Atesyan listed six eligible bishops for the position, including his seminary classmates - the Archbishops of New York and Washington, DC - as well as one in Germany, an 83-year-old bishop in Istanbul, a bishop with three months' tenure in Armenia, and himself. Of these six, only Atesyan, the German bishop, and the newly-tenured bishop have expressed an interest in the position. In order to begin the election process, the Religious Council of the Patriarchate must first apply for permission from the GOT. Atesyan is the current leader of the Religious Council. Once the Religious Council obtains permission, delegates at every church will cast ballots to elect the new patriarch. According to Atesyan, he is being pressured by roughly twenty percent of the members of the Religious Council to hold the election before the death of Mesrob II. He said that the remaining agree with the December decision by the Religious Council that reaffirmed that Mesrob II had been elected patriarch for life.

The Property Issue: A Quarter of Turkey Would be Ours

16. (C) The Archbishop said he was hopeful that the Patriarchate might see the return of Church properties in Istanbul after the August deadline for petitions set by the General Directorate of Foundations. He contended that the AKP would like to return the properties to their rightful owners, but the CHP prevents this by going to local courts. At this time, he explained, most of the seized Church property is in the hands of the municipal treasury rather than third party owners. The number of Armenian properties now in GOT and third party hands across Turkey is so great that "if we demanded," he argued, "a quarter of Turkey would be ours."

17. (C) The Archbishop himself hails from Silvan, a small town

outside of the Southeastern city of Diyarbakir. Of the Church property in Diyarbakir, 160 pieces have been sold and 40 remain in church hands. When he was a child, he commented, Diyarbakir was home to 10,000 Armenians who left during the political instability in the 1970s and 1980s for Holland, New Jersey, and Belgium. The Archbishop's own immediate and extended family largely lives in New Jersey. Now he noted that only three or four openly Armenian families still live in Diyarbakir.

Converted Armenians and Intermarriage

¶18. (C) The Archbishop's sister converted to Islam in the 1950s when her husband's life was threatened if he were not to convert. While his sister much later reconverted to being openly Christian and now resides in Istanbul, her children and grandchildren all are considered Muslims and list Muslim as their religion on their national ID cards. The Archbishop noted that two of his great-nephews reconverted and are now studying at the Armenian seminary in Jerusalem, but they are the exceptions in his family.

¶19. (C) He explained that like many Armenians in Turkey, 80 percent of the Armenians in his home town of Silvan converted to Islam in the 1950s, but are not practicing Muslims. The Armenians in the town of Hemsin on the Black Sea coast near Georgia converted to Islam 250 years ago to avoid exorbitant taxes on Christians and they still speak Armenian. He estimated that up to two million "converted" Armenians still reside in Turkey, but some tribal leaders may choose not to convert in order to maintain power. The Archbishop provided the example of one tribal leader near Urfa who remains unconverted to retain power over 10,000 Armenians in the region. He also pointed to a recent wave of reconversions of Armenians in Tunceli as evidence that some regions are more amenable to Christians.

¶10. (C) The Archbishop expressed serious concerns about the number of Armenians marrying Turks - at least 40 percent of marriages are between Armenian Turks and Turks he estimated. "For me," he said, "10 percent is too high." He blamed Armenian families for not sending their children to Armenian

ISTANBUL 00000068 003 OF 003

schools and Armenian summer camps as well as not attending church more often. He also considered the GOT culpable for intentionally forcing Armenian youth to socialize with Turkish youth by taking away income-earning property and forcing Armenian schools to close.

¶11. (C) In an effort to protect their economic and personal welfare, some Armenian Turks in the past converted to Islam. The gradual increase in the number of "reconversions" marks an improvement in their situation over the last few years. The new patriarch will face the challenge of working with the GOT and opposition to reclaim hundreds of seized properties and supporting a large migrant community. At the same time, he will be challenged to oversee improvement in relations between Turks and Armenians under the pendulum of a potential Armenian Genocide Resolution.

Wiener